

The Republican convention and the specter of dictatorship

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George W. Bush's closing speech Thursday night at the Republican National Convention should serve as a warning of what is being prepared by his administration in its pursuit of the interests of America's ruling elite.

The festival of fear, intimidation and hatred staged inside Madison Square Garden carried with it the implicit threat of escalating war abroad and dictatorship at home. It expressed the perplexity of a ruling elite that perceives itself as besieged by economic and social contradictions that are spinning out of control.

The speech was delivered in an atmosphere dominated by police repression of demonstrators in the streets of New York City, and grotesque attempts inside the Garden to cast the sadist in the White House as a divinely chosen leader of the people.

Bush strode onto the stage through a pair of Corinthian columns and climbed up terraced steps to a raised circular platform to deliver his address. He stood above the crowd on a blue rug bearing the presidential seal, reading nervously from his TelePrompTer. The production suggested something out of the Roman Empire.

The message sent by the elaborate facade constructed in Madison Square Garden is best summed up in the famous words of France's Louis XIV, "L'état c'est moi": I am the state.

This image reflected the pretensions of a government that has abrogated fundamental constitutional rights and assumed unprecedented powers. It has asserted the authority of the president, as commander-in-chief, to detain anyone indefinitely and without charges merely by labeling him an "enemy combatant," to wage preemptive and unprovoked wars, and to employ assassination and torture in pursuit of Washington's global aims.

The speech was peppered with phrases such as "nothing will hold us back," "we're not turning back," and "I will never relent." The overall impression was that of an administration determined to keep hold of the reins of power, no matter what.

Bush's principal means of persuasion, exhibited throughout the four-day convention, is terrorizing the American people by invoking a supposedly ubiquitous terrorist threat that only he is prepared to counter. The "lesson of September 11," according to the US president, is that US military action is justified

anywhere and any time Washington claims to perceive a potential threat. "We are staying on the offensive, striking terrorists abroad so we don't have to face them here at home," Bush declared.

In a crude political sleight of hand, he justified the invasion and occupation of Iraq in the name of the so-called war on terror, despite the near-universal acknowledgment that no ties existed between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. He went on to refer to all those resisting US occupation and the US-controlled puppet regimes in both Iraq and Afghanistan as "terrorists."

Addressing himself to US troops in both countries, Bush declared, "Because of your service and sacrifice, we are defeating the terrorists where they live and plan, and you're making America safer." That these "terrorists" are fighting in their own countries and seeking to expel a foreign occupation army, and are growing rapidly in numbers and popular support, are details that escaped Bush.

He cast the eruption of US militarism around the globe in messianic terms. "America is called to lead the cause of freedom in a new century," Bush declared, adding, "The freedom of many and the future security of our nation now depends on us."

That this divinely inspired crusade has led to the deployment of hundreds of thousands of US troops astride the world's largest oil reserves, shipping routes and pipelines was dismissed by the US president. "We have fought the terrorist across the earth, not for pride, not for power, but because the lives of our citizens are at stake."

Bush spent more time than any other principal speaker at the convention on his administration's domestic agenda. Here, looting of the public treasury combines with robbing working people in order to further enrich the top 1 percent who form Bush's most important political base.

"America must be the best place in the world to do business," said Bush. In other words, all barriers to the American financial oligarchy expanding their immense personal fortunes must be eliminated. All regulations covering employment, wages and safety must be scrapped, and all fetters on the extraction of profit from labor done away with.

One of the most tumultuous rounds of cheering and applause was reserved by the delegates for a seemingly innocuous line

about tax laws. Bemoaning the amount of time it takes for people to fill out tax forms, Bush declared, “The American people deserve, and our economic future demands, a simpler, fairer, pro-growth system. In a new term, I will lead a bipartisan effort to reform and simplify the federal tax code.”

His audience knew very well what the Bush meant. The administration seeks to vastly expand upon the massive tax cuts it has already implemented—cuts that are estimated to cost as much as \$300 billion in government revenues in 2004 alone. It wants to turn the clock back more than a century, eliminating the graduated income tax, doing away with estate and capital gains taxes as well as taxes on savings—in short, to allow the wealthiest to pay no taxes whatsoever.

This policy is designed not only to line the pockets of the country’s multimillionaires and billionaires, but also to create a desperate fiscal crisis that will force the outright destruction of what little remains of government-funded social services and benefits in the US. Reduced tax revenues—paid entirely by working people—would be diverted to the military and the domestic police apparatus.

Once again Bush trotted out the proposal to privatize the Social Security system and subordinate its hundreds of billions of dollars in retirement funds to the profit interests of Wall Street. Bush portrayed the private retirement plan as part of an “ownership” society, which is essentially another way of saying that the wealth and profits of the super-rich will remain untouchable, while for the rest it will be every man for himself.

The character assassination that the Republican convention unleashed against its Democratic Party rivals has prompted Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry to make a slight change in course. For the last six months, Kerry has avoided harsh criticisms of the administration in an effort to convince the ruling establishment that he can be trusted to continue the war in Iraq and eschew any significant social reforms. Now he and the Democrats find themselves compelled to respond to the mudslinging of Bush and Cheney.

But the nature of their response only underscores the reactionary character of the Democratic campaign. Speaking at a midnight rally in Ohio following Bush’s convention address, Kerry directed his principal fire not at the right-wing, anti-working class policies of the Republicans, but at their charge that he is not fit to be “commander-in-chief” and lead the global “war on terrorism.”

Yet again he invoked his four-month tour of military duty in Vietnam, proclaiming that he had proven his willingness to “defend my country”—as opposed to Bush and Cheney, who avoided the war. This, even though at the time he acknowledged that the war was not a defense of America, but rather an act of imperialist aggression.

Kerry broke his near silence about the administration’s policy in Iraq, denouncing the Bush White House for “misleading” the United States into war. The word was chosen with extreme care, carrying with it the implicit suggestion that had Kerry

been president, he would have led the country into war properly. He reiterated his position that the occupation of Iraq will continue, while claiming that he would be able to drum up financial contributions and foreign troops to sustain the imperialist enterprise.

Commenting on the speeches at the convention, Kerry added, “What we’ve learned now is that the president and the Republican Party will say anything and do anything in order to try to get re-elected.”

This is indeed the case, but there is no indication that the Democratic Party is prepared to act with anything approaching the determination shown by the Republicans to prevent that from happening. Rather, its campaign serves only to conceal the real dangers confronting American working people.

Despite the fact that the entire Bush reelection campaign is based on exploiting the deaths of 3,000 victims of the September 11 terrorist attacks—which occurred when Bush himself was commander-in-chief and thus responsible for the security breaches which made the attacks possible—the Democrats have not made a significant issue of the apparent stand-down of US security in the months leading up to the terrorist attack.

The only politically serious explanation of the circumstances of 9/11 is that the Bush administration was aware of an impending attack and allowed it to take place, in order to provide the necessary pretext to carry out plans for invasion of the Middle East and Central Asia which were well under way before the four airliners were hijacked. But the Democratic Party, like the Republicans, is a political instrument of big business. Its first loyalty is to the state apparatus which defends ruling elite, and it therefore must remain silent on this most critical issue.



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